

# Working Respectfully With Indigenous Communities Around Data, Research, and Evidence

## A Resource for State Education Agencies

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### Purpose

This resource is intended to support state education agency (SEA) staff members as they build partnerships with tribal leaders to improve educational outcomes for Native students through the use of data, research, and evidence. Tribal governments are sovereign nations that promote self-determination<sup>1</sup> for approximately one-half million American Indian<sup>2</sup> students in the United States, who experience disproportionately high rates of special education identification, suspension, and chronic absenteeism (Collier, 2012; Hanson, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This disproportionality is due to structural inequities that persist in educational systems, such as a hostile school climate and policies that do not accommodate absences for ceremonial and cultural observances (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### Audience

The target audience is SEA staff. This resource is meant to help them collaborate more effectively with tribal communities so that the integration of SEA and tribal community resources can help benefit the academic and social-emotional outcomes for Native American students.

### Principles for Working With Indigenous Communities Around Data, Research, and Evidence

Centering students and their needs is essential for building strong, mutually beneficial, and lasting relationships with Indigenous communities. In addition, the inclusion of Indigenous expertise and knowledge is key for SEA staff as they partner with community members to conduct required evaluation, research, and data collection in order to benefit students.

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<sup>1</sup> Self-determination is the idea that Indian nations should determine their own futures (Cornell & Kalt, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indigenous are terms used throughout this text to refer to Indigenous peoples of the United States. Each of these are imperfect, general terms.



## Principle 1: Develop your Indigenous literacy.

Indigenous literacy is having basic knowledge of a community's history, culture, and experiences. Every federally recognized tribe is a sovereign nation with a unique history. In addition, every federally recognized tribe has a unique relationship with government agencies, documented in treaties, statutes, and court decisions. A community's experiences of federal appropriation and extraction may result in a reluctance to establish relationships with SEA staff, especially around collecting information considered private to the community. Moreover, indications of outdated cultural stereotypes or using one standard approach with all Indigenous groups may be immediately off-putting to tribal leaders. Each community will likely require unique processes and protocols for working with SEA staff to collect data and conduct research (Gardner-Vandy & Scalice, 2020; Ferland et al., 2021; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; Nature Conservancy, 2021).

### Practices

- » Devote time and resources to building basic knowledge of a community's history, culture, and experiences (Ferland et al., 2021).
- » Seek primary sources of information — direct interactions, experience, and personal relationships with community members — to inform understandings of contemporary Indigenous realities (White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, 2009).
- » Determine whether the community is comprised of one or multiple tribes (e.g., White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache are distinct tribes) (Molina & Layland, 2020).

“Learn about tribal histories, tribal sovereignty, and follow through accordingly. This knowledge is essential year-round, beyond Native American Heritage Month in November.”

— SEA staff member

## Principle 2: Reflect on what you and your agency bring to the relationship that supports collaboration.

Trust and a sense of shared responsibility are key elements of strong relationships that will support the truly collaborative use of data, research, and evidence to improve student outcomes. However, outsiders have often dismissed or marginalized Indigenous knowledge traditions, which has impeded development of such trust (Blanchard, 2020; Gardner-Vandy & Scalice, 2020). It can be helpful to remember that tribal communities are under no obligation to establish a relationship with SEA staff. So, it is important to come from a place of humility and service orientation.

### Practices

- » Reflect on your own beliefs<sup>3</sup> about Native peoples. Gather information about the SEA's prior efforts to engage with Indigenous communities, both in general and around past data collection or research efforts in particular. Foster transparency by sharing available student data and evidence.
- » Listen to what community members say they want. Identify their priorities and make them the focus of, or at least part of, the research effort.
- » Centering the needs of Indigenous students in the conversation is one way to build a common focus for collaborative work with these communities.

“Dashboard data brought issues to our attention. [As a result of consultation and action] Native community leaders are now being heard, being valued. Chronic absenteeism rates have been reduced 18%.”

— **Becky Love (Muscogee Creek)**, former school counseling coordinator and Native American advisory member, Shasta County Office of Education, California

## Principle 3: Invest for sustaining mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships.

Meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities involves multiple modes of communication and mutual agreements about processes (Takeshorse, 2010). Allocate time, human resources, and financial resources to cultivate and sustain relationships beyond specific projects and potential changes in project staff or leadership.

<sup>3</sup> SEA staff beliefs about culturally responsive education, antiracism, inclusiveness, and gender equality may all matter for how they are heard and received by Indigenous communities. For example, gender stereotypes may be especially important to consider when SEAs are seeking to establish relationships with nations that have matrilineal governance structures.

## Practices

- » Allocate resources for ongoing community engagement to assess community needs, priorities, and the strength and mutual benefit of the relationship as it relates to research, evaluation, and data collection.
- » Demonstrate transparency in consultations by listening deeply and sharing back what you have heard and how you are responding.
- » Foster clarity and build common understandings about the vision and goals of joint work by fully explaining acronyms, vocabulary, terminology, and research methods.<sup>4</sup>
- » Utilize multiple modes of communication, including in-person and remote meetings, telephone calls, postal mail, email, and social media to maximize access to and participation in the consultative process.

“We have developed a true relationship and [it is] growing to one of respect. [The agency staff] want to know about our community and people. They are asking questions and listening.”

— Gary Rickard (Northern California Wintu Tribe),  
Native American advisory  
member, Shasta County  
Office of Education, California

## Principle 4: Honor Indigenous communities’ sovereignty, unique political status, protocols, and ways of being.

The sovereignty of Indian tribes and their historical relationship with government agencies affects programs, responsibilities, and initiatives related to research, data collection, and their use. Your SEA may have established protocols with tribes for staff to follow (White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, 2009). Following your Indigenous partners’ leadership about their nation- and community-specific practices demonstrates respect for their ways of knowing, being, and doing.

## Practices

- » Interview community leaders to build understanding of structures, preferred communication pathways, ways of gathering or conveying information, and existing supports for students.
- » Build in adequate time for tribal decision-making processes so tribal leaders may deliberate about the short-term burden and long-term consequences of decisions regarding their community (White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, 2009).
- » Sustain relationships by co-developing an official memorandum of understanding (MOU), mutual commitments of resources, or both (Gardner-Vandy & Scalice, 2020).

“We are going to hold a focus group with parents so that we can be sure that they know what is going on [in the County Office of Education], and we can learn from them about what is going on [at their end].”

— Gary Rickard (Northern California Wintu Tribe),  
Native American advisory  
member, Shasta County  
Office of Education, California

<sup>4</sup> Although tribal education agencies/tribal education departments (TEAs/TEDs) may not use the same verbiage, the TEA/TED may have the same or similar practices as those suggested by the SEA.

## **Principle 5: Recognize and integrate Indigenous expertise — this is essential in building collaborative relationships.**

Many conversations and research about education continue to present deficit views of historically marginalized children, families, and communities based on race, class, language, and culture (Valencia, 2010). Integrating Indigenous expertise, practices, and traditions when generating research questions, designing studies, gathering data, interpreting findings, sharing findings within the community, and using the findings to improve programs and strategies helps to ensure that research is conducted in a culturally relevant and culturally sustaining manner. Addressing colonialism and antiracism centers Indigenous community members as experts, recognizing Indigenous voices and participation in decision-making (Ferland et al., 2021).

### **Practices**

- » Recognize the range of expertise that is present in a community in order to engage in partnerships related to research, data collection, and their use. Expertise can be sought from elders, tribal government representatives, educators, cultural practitioners, linguists, scientists, entrepreneurs, scholars, artists, parents, and youth.
- » Identify how consultancies, working groups, commissions, task forces, councils, boards, and advisory groups convened by your agency may reflect the racial, geographic, cultural, and other diversity of Indigenous families and communities.

“Consider how to enact kinship with multiple tribes, identities, and cultures. Reflect upon what makes Indigeneity, intersectional identities, inclusion of two-spirit people, and contemporary life.”  
— SEA staff member

## **Principle 6: Partner with tribal communities to inform SEA system improvements.**

Conducting research and using data in collaboration with tribal communities informs SEA staff about the administrative and procedural barriers faced by Indigenous community partners when working with SEAs, which could include restrictions on approved expenditures, delayed payments for goods and services, requirements for extensive written documentation, short reporting deadlines, duplicative paperwork, and inflexible work schedules. An office of tribal relations that coordinates outreach to Indigenous communities may minimize redundant SEA requests for data (Gardner-Vandy & Scalice, 2020).

## Practices

- » **Collect and analyze data on the efficiency of work processes and impacts of collaborative projects (Ferland et al., 2021). Respect Indigenous data sovereignty, the right of a tribal nation to own and govern how its data are collected and applied (Rodriguez-Lonebear & Rainie, 2016).**
- » **Develop and propose alternative policies and procedures that prioritize the needs of Indigenous communities and meet agency requirements for data collection and evidence.**

“Consider tribal timelines in scheduling work and developing policies. Create time and space for inclusion.”

— **SEA staff member**

“Link with internal SEA equity teams and coordinate equity work within the agency. Align principles and actions together.”

— **SEA staff member**

## References

Each of the references cited in this list played a central role in the development of this resource. REL West is grateful to have these resources to draw upon. Where an idea is drawn from a specific resource (rather than from the set of all resources listed here), we offer specific attribution as shown in the text.

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## Additional resources

The following list of resources is for individuals who want further information on student count data, Indigenous scholarship, and the aforementioned six principles.

### Student count data

Arizona Department of Education. (2021). *SY 2020–2021 enrollment*. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from <https://www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data>

California Department of Education. (2021). *2020–21 enrollment by ethnicity*. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=state&year=2020-21>

Centers for Disease Control. (2018). *American Indian and Alaskan Native metro populations*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/tribal/tribes-organizations-health/tribes/metro-populations.html> \ National Center for Education Statistics. (2019b). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups: Indicator 10: Reading achievement*. Institute of Education Sciences. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_rda.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp)

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### Indigenous scholarship

Cordova, V. F. (2007). *How it is: The Native American philosophy of V. F. Cordova* (K. D. Moore, K. Peters, T. Jojola, & A. Lacy, Eds.). University of Arizona Press.

Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc. (2017). *7 tips on building relationships with Indigenous peoples*. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/7-tips-on-building-relationships-with-indigenous-peoples>

Layland, A., & Molina, M. (2019). *Sovereignty performance management: Performance management for Tribes, tribal education agencies, and tribal education departments*. Academic Development Institute.

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### Related to principles

Cornell, S., & Kalt, J. P. (1998). Sovereignty and nation-building: The development challenge in Indian country today. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 22(3), 187–214.

Muhammad, D. A., Tec, R., & Ramirez, K. (2019). *Racial wealth snapshot: American Indians/Native Americans*. National Community Reinvestment Coalition. <https://ncrc.org/racial-wealth-snapshot-american-indians-native-americans/>

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 9, 117–125. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1524839919884912>